

Phonosemantic ideas in the history of linguistics

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The Russian poet B. Pasternak says “*the music of words is not an acoustic phenomenon and does not consist of the euphony of vowels and consonants taken separately. It results from the correlation of the meaning of the utterance with its sound*”¹

Phonemes are usually defined as the smallest language units, which have no meaning of their own, but they help to distinguish between different words or different grammatical meanings of the same word. Many outstanding philosophers and linguists were against sound symbolism, and found it to be truly arbitrary.

John Locke (1689), spoke out against the idea in his “An Essay on Human Understanding” as follows: “Words [...] come to be made use of by Men, as the Signs of their Ideas; not by any natural connection, that there is between particular articulate Sounds and certain Ideas, for then there would be but one language amongst all Men; but by voluntary Imposition, whereby such a Word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an Idea.”²

Locke argued that if there were any natural connection between **Sound** and **Idea**, we would all be speaking the same language. He came to the conclusion which is based on the assumption, that there is only one level of word meaning.

The most celebrated opponent of the phonosemantic hypothesis is Ferdinand de Saussure (1916). In his chapter entitled “Nature of the Linguistic Sign”:

“*The link between signal and signification is arbitrary*”. Since we are treating a sign as a combination in which a signal is associated with a signification, there is no internal connection between the idea ‘sister’ and the French sequence of sounds s-o-r which acts as its signal. The same idea might well be represented by any other sequence of sounds.³

However, sound-symbolists believe that speech sounds do have meanings of their own (which are ‘connotative’) expressed and perceived subconsciously.

Meaning is fundamental to human society and language is one of the primary ways of conveying meaning. The segmental and prosodic features of the message perceived help the hearer to distinguish not only between lexical and grammatical meanings of language units but also between social, sexual, educational, geographic, professional status of the speaker. Besides by phonetic characteristics we can judge about the speaker’s emotions, character, health, mood, etc.

Phonosemantic ideas are based on the assumption that separate sounds due to their articulatory and acoustic properties may evoke certain ideas, perception, feelings, images, vague though they might be. The statement about the symbolic character of individual speech sounds may seem subjective and arbitrary. However, scientists provide us with unlimited examples from European and other languages to prove the existence of a certain relation between sounds and word meanings.

The problem of phonosemantics has always been a case of deep concern among linguists throughout the history of linguistics. In the 17th-19th centuries the subject was sporadically discussed in religious and mystical texts. In the 18th and 19th centuries, many philosophers, poets and writers expressed sympathy or evidence for the "Phonosemantic Hypothesis", among them Alexander Pope, Goethe, Honore de Balzac, Victor Hugo, Lewis Carroll.

The problem of phonosemantics concerned modern linguists as well.

Mikhael Lomonosov (18th century) is one of the first who did research on the sounding of the word and drew up a table of "sound-meaning" in Russian. He wrote about expressive means of the repeated sounds, though he spoke not of sounds, but of letters. The frequent repetition of the letter "a" can promote to the representation of splendour, vast space, depth and height and also to a great fear. The frequent use of the letters *e, u, b, io* - to the representation of tenderness, sweetness, to the deplorable and miserable things.⁴

In the middle of the 18-th century Wilhelm von Humboldt distinguished between onomatopoeia and sound symbolism. In the 19th century the reality of the expressiveness of words was championed by Humboldt in Germany, and later by Grammont in France.

Humboldt (1836) was certain that a connection between the sound of a word and its meaning exists; therefore, he distinguished between onomatopoeia and sound symbolism. The sound is not, in his view, a directly imitative sign but a sign which indicates a quality, the sign and the object have in common; to designate objects, language selected sounds which partly independently and partly in comparison with others produce an impression which to the ear is similar to that which the object makes upon the mind. Humboldt said that this kind of sign process has undoubtedly exercised a prevailing, perhaps even exclusive, influence on primitive word formation resulting in a certain likeness of word- formation in all languages.⁵

Maurice Grammont (1901) saw sound-meaning correspondences as the essence of poetry. These correspondences, though, are not in most cases or onomatopoeic, purely imitative. He observes that any ordinary French phrase can of course be rendered in any other language, but that an element of meaning becomes especially prevalent in poetry that makes it inaccessible to exact translation, and this he considers to be the contribution that sound is making to meaning. He therefore views some utterances as more mimetic and therefore higher or better than others. His book is divided into various 'ideas' – repetition, accumulation, sorrow, joy, irony, silence, smallness, etc.. Grammont provides examples from great poetry exhibiting each of these 'ideas' and shows how they are expressed with the same types of sounds in the poetry not only of France, but also of other countries.⁶

Leonard Bloomfield (1909) a well-known American linguist, states that in human speech, different sounds have different meanings.⁷

Otto Jespersen (1922) discussed the phenomenon of natural expressiveness of speech sounds and concluded that it should be seen not simply as a force that influenced the initial formation of language but as one operating continually to make the words used more appropriate to their sense. Sound-symbolism in his view is a reality in the modern use and development of languages which in the course of time grows richer in symbolic words. He points out, that there is not much logic denying any kind of sound symbolism and in seeing in our words only a collection of accidental and irritational associations of sound and meaning. He states that sounds may in some cases be symbolic of their sense even if they are not so in all words.

He also presented detailed material bearing on sound symbolism:

“ the simplest case is the direct imitation of the sound: thus *clink, splash, bleat, snort, grunt...* .But as our speech organs are not capable of giving a perfect imitation of all ‘unarticulated’ sound, the choice of speech sounds is to a certain extent arbitrary and different nations have chosen different combinations, more or less conventionalized, for the same sounds”⁸

E.g. English: cock-a-doodle-do French: coquelico Russian: ку-ка реку

W. Kohler (1929) devised an experiment on rather similar lines to investigate the symbolic relation between visual patterns and the sound-structure of words. He made use of two arbitrary visual shapes, one rounded and the other angular and invented two words as names for them, TAKETE and MALUMA. Subjects were asked to associate with each shape one of the invented words. The overwhelming majority of subjects assigned MALUMA to the rounded shape and TAKETE to the angular one.⁹

In his experiment Edward Sapir (1884-1939) used two invented words MAL and MIL which subjects were asked to identify with ‘a large table’ or ‘a small table’. Most of them associated MAL with ‘a large table’ and MIL with ‘a small table’. Sapir did not, however, believe the feeling-tone that exists in words to be inherent to them, but characterized it rather as a ‘sentimental growth on the word’s true body’.¹⁰

We have also tried to check this association. But the knowledge of Russian made our subjects hesitate between MIL and MAL which coincides with the Russian root *mal-* meaning ‘small’. So when we used TAL and TIL instead of MAL and MIL to avoid unnecessary associations, most of them found TIL for ‘a small table’ and TAL for ‘a large table’.

John Rupert Firth (1964) who disbelieved in sound symbolism assembled large collections of symbolic words and emphasized the systemic way they may be related to each other, quite separately from any etymological links; he acknowledged that we are appreciably affected by initial and final phoneme groups not ordinarily recognized as having any function. He mentions that the words *slack, slouch, sludge, slime, slosh, slash, sloppy, slug, sluggard ...etc* are in varying degrees pejorative.¹¹

Suitbert Ertel (1972) states that phonosemantics cannot be easily combined with Saussurian structuralism. In his view, one of the difficulties that researchers have always had in accepting the “Phonosemantic Hypothesis”, or even a much weaker version of it, is that its acceptance requires a very different view of language than is generally accepted – a view in which semantics cannot be abstracted away from language itself, and in which language cannot be abstracted away from man. Ertel describes the purpose of his research as follows: He selected four fairly narrow semantic domains: words for sounds, words of motion, words for actions performed with the mouth, and words for sound produced by animals. He then selected German 175 words in these 4 semantic classes, and had them translated into 36 languages covering all the major language families of the world. Finally he counted the frequency of the phonemes which occurred in each of the verbs and found that certain types of sounds occurred much more frequently with certain verbs than one would anticipate if the relationship between sound and meaning were purely arbitrary.¹²

Because Ertel’s crosslinguistic tests were applied across a very broad range of languages, and not just to the Germanic languages, they are on some level universal.

Roman Jakobson (1987) was probably the most influential phonosemanticist of the latter half of the 20th Century. Like von Humboldt, L. Bloomfield and Ertel, Jakobson had a very strong intuition for the wholeness of language. He felt that many distinctions, including the distinction between form and meaning drawn by structuralists, generativists and others were not entirely valid. Jakobson's thoughts resemble Grammont's in that to him, poetry existed when a writer was being attentive to the effect of form on content.¹³

Verier (20th century) a French scientist, as a specialist on English versification, suggests that we should try to pronounce the vowels [a:, i:, u:] in a strongly articulated manner and with closed eyes. If we do so we are sure to come to the conclusion that each of these sounds expresses a definite feeling or state of mind. Thus he maintains that the sound [u:] generally expresses sorrow or seriousness, [i:] produces the feeling of joy and so on.¹⁴

The evidence for the reality of sound symbolism in various forms seems strong. The fact it exists within any single language can hardly be doubted. That it can operate between languages and language communities to a considerable extent also seems to be established by extensive research. If sound symbolism is a reality, the problem is, how it should be explained. Most researchers have felt the need for some explanation but have not been able to suggest what form it might take. Nevertheless the explanations offered by those few authors who have attempted to understand the basis of sound symbolism show remarkable convergence. Jakobson says that sound symbolism derives from an inmost, natural similarity association between sound and meaning; sound symbolism is an undeniably objective reality founded on association between the different sensory modalities, particularly between vision and hearing.

Notes

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2. The Unified Underlying Sound Meaning of Some Basic English Word. //Margo's Magical Letter Page// <http://www.trismegistos.com/Dissertation.p.110>
3. S.V.Voronin. Osnovi Fonosemantimki Moskva: Lenand. 2006. p25-29
4. S.V.Voronin. Osnovi Fonosemantimki Moskva: Lenand 2006.p10
5. .The Unified Underlying Sound Meaning of Some Basic English Word. //Margo's Magical Letter Page// <http://www.trismegistos.com/Dissertation/p.104-105>
6. 9,11, 12,14 See Allot Robin. Sound Symbolism. in //Language in the Würun Glaciation//.Berlin 1995.pp.15-38. /Robin Allot.1995.In Language in the Würm Glaciation.ed.by Udo L. Figge, 15-38.Bochum:Brockmeyer./
7. Bloomfield. L. Language. London, 1935. p 566.
8. Jespersen O. Language: /Its Nature Development and Origin/. Allen and Unwin London., 1949, p 448
- 10 Sapir, Edward (1929), "A Study in Phonetic Symbolism", *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 12: 225-239.
- 13 The Unified Underlying Sound Meaning of Some Basic English Word. //Margo's Magical Letter Page// <http://www.trismegistos.com/Dissertation/p.81-83>

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2. Firth J.R. Tongues of Man and Speech. London, 1964
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4. Jeffries L. Meaning in English. An Introduction to language study. 1998
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7. Jakobson, Roman (1978), //Sound Symbolism and Distinctive Features//, unpublished ms. presented at the Conference on Semiotics and the Arts, University of Michigan.

Ֆոնոսեմանտիկայի վերաբերյալ տեսակետները լեզվաբանության պատմության մեջ

Հնչյունները սովորաբար սահմանվում են, որպես լեզվի փոքրագույն միավորներ, որոնք չունեն ինքնուրույն իմաստ, բայց որոնք օգնում են տարբերակելու միևնույն բառի տարբեր քերականական իմաստներ: Մեր խնդիրն է ուսումնասիրել հայտնի լեզվաբանների կողմից հնչեցրած կարծիքները լեզվաբանության պատմության զարգացման ընթացքում: Պետք է նշել սակայն, որ լեզվաբանների միջև կարծիքները հակասական են:

Լեզվաբանները սովորաբար օգտագործում են «ամենափոքր իմաստային միավոր» գաղափարը, որպես հնչյույթի սահմանում: Այս տերմինը օգտագործվում է և անկախ բառերի, և իմաստային ածանցների հետ: Չնայած դրան, կան շատ լեզվաբանական մակարդակներ, որոնցում իմաստը գործում է: Ընկալվող հաղորդագրության շնորհիվ, մենք կարող ենք տարբերակել ոչ միայն լեզվի քերականական և բառագիտական առանձնահատկությունների միջև, այլ նաև որոշել խոսողի սոցիալական, սեռական, կրթական, աշխարհագրական, մասնագիտական դիրքը:

Գիտնականները տալիս են բազմաթիվ օրինակներ Եվրոպական և այլ լեզուներով, ապացուցելու համար բառի արտահայտած հնչյունի և բառիմաստի միջև հարաբերությունների առկայությունը:

Առանձին հնչյունների սիմվոլիկ նկարագրության մասին դրույթը կարող է թվալ սուբյեկտիվ և ինքնական: Բայց հետաքրքիր հոգեբանական փորձերը ապացուցել են, որ որոշակի հնչյուններ առաջացնում են որոշակի ասոցիացիաներ: Նոր հայտնագործությունները ցույց տվեցին, որ շտապ կլինի ժխտել տարածված ճայնային սիմվոլիզմի առկայությունը: